

# New Discoveries at Santa Costanza

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The Church of Santa Costanza<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 1) in Rome, which is attached to the Early Christian cemetery church of Sant' Agnese<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 2), is ubiquitously cited by scholars as the original mausoleum of Constantina, the daughter of Constantine, and the preeminent extant ex-

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<sup>1</sup>A complete bibliography on the church of Santa Costanza is too extensive to be included here. However, see especially C. Cecchelli, *S. Agnese fuori le mura e S. Costanza* (Rome, 1932); G. De Angelis d'Ossat, "Chiesa di Santa Costanza," *Palladio* 4 (1940), 44–45; A. Prandi, "Osservazioni su Santa Costanza," *RendPontAcc* 19 (1942–43), 281–304; M. Stettler, "Zur Rekonstruktion von Santa Costanza," *Roemische Mitteilungen* 58 (1943), 76–86; R. Perrotti, "Recenti ritrovamenti presso S. Costanza," *Palladio* 6 (1956), 80–83; R. Polacco, *Il mausoleo di S. Costanza* (Padua, 1973); A. P. Frutaz, *Il complesso monumentale di Sant' Agnese e di S. Costanza*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City, 1969), 72–83; H. Brandenburg, *Roms fruehchristliche Basiliken des 4. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1979), 93–97; and M. Johnson, "Late Antique Imperial Mausolea," Ph.D. diss. (Princeton University, 1986), 91–101.

<sup>2</sup>For the cemetery church of Sant' Agnese, see especially F. Deichmann, "Die Lage der Constantinischen Basilika

ample of an Imperial Roman/ Early Christian mausoleum. Although there is no documentary evidence, it has always been dated to the mid-fourth century, in fact, no later than ca. A.D. 350.<sup>3</sup> And all scholars agree that when Constantina died in Bithynia, Asia Minor, in 354, her body was returned to Rome for burial at Sant' Agnese and specifically in the mausoleum that was first described as the church of Santa Costanza in the ninth century.<sup>4</sup> The *Liber Pontificalis* recounts that the cemetery church of Sant' Agnese and its baptistry were constructed by Constantine at the request of Constantina, during the reign of Pope Sylvester, that is, between 314 and 335.<sup>5</sup> However, Krautheimer has suggested that it is more probable that Sant' Agnese was constructed during the reign of Constantius II, that is, be-

der heiligen Agnes an der Via Nomentana," *RACr* 22 (1946), 213–34, repr. in F. Deichmann, *Rom, Ravenna, Konstantinopel, Nasher Osten* (Weisbaden, 1982), 283–304; Perrotti, "Ritrovamenti," 80–83; idem "La basilica di S. Agnese fuori le Mura," *Palladio* 11 (1961), 157–64; Frutaz, *Complesso*, 27–34; R. Krautheimer, *Rome, Profile of a City, AD 312–1308* (Rome, 1980), 42–45; F. Tolotti, "Le basiliche cimiteriali con deambulatorio del suburbio romano: Questione ancora aperta," *Roemische Mitteilungen* 89 (1982), 153–211; and T. Heres, *Paries: A Proposal for a Dating System of Late Antique Masonry Structures in Rome and Ostia* (Amsterdam, 1982), 192–94.

<sup>3</sup>The only exceptions are Perrotti, "La Basilica di S. Agnese," 160, who dates Santa Costanza between 355 and 361, and Heres, *Paries*, 305–8, who dates the mausoleum to the "third quarter of the fourth century, possibly c. 355."

<sup>4</sup>On 21 January, the feast of Sant' Agnese, in 865, Bishop Rhodatus of Soissons celebrated Mass "in aeclesia sanctae Constantiae iuxta eandem sanctae virginis basilicam." See the *Liber Pontificalis*, ed. L. Duchesne, 2 vols. (Paris, 1886–1892; repr. 1955), II, 163.

<sup>5</sup>*Liber Pontificalis*, I, 180–81.

tween 337 and 349, when Constantina was still residing in Rome.<sup>6</sup> More recently, Tolotti's study of the Roman cemetery churches of the fourth century indicates that Sant' Agnese was the last in a series of such structures to be built and that it dates from ca. 340 to 350.<sup>7</sup>

My own investigation of Santa Costanza and Sant' Agnese led me to the hypothesis that there may have been a previous structure on the site presently occupied by Santa Costanza that could have a bearing on the dating of the rotunda and its relationship to Sant' Agnese. In 1843, Valadier and Canina excavated at Sant' Agnese and published their findings in a supplement to Desgodetz' *Sugli Edifici Antichi di Roma* that included their excavation drawing of part of the southern side aisle of Sant' Agnese and the narthex of Santa Costanza<sup>8</sup> (Fig. 3). Their excavation drawing indicates that the foundations of Santa Costanza are completely separate from those of Sant' Agnese, that the foundation remains of a structure were discovered immediately in front of the entrance to Santa Costanza, and that these foundations are integral with those of Sant' Agnese.

For six weeks during May and June of 1992, I conducted a stratigraphic excavation of the western half of the narthex and apse of Santa Costanza in order to clarify the archaeological history of the site, particularly with regard to the relationship between Santa Costanza and Sant' Agnese, and to determine, if possible, the original form and function of the unidentified structure indicated on Valadier and Canina's plan. The excavation plan (Fig. 4) indicates the extent of the excavation. The following is a brief summary of the most important excavation findings and conclusions.

There have been numerous modern interventions at the site, most not documented, which can be identified by the more or less regular trenches discovered during the excavation. For example, level 57 on the excavation plan defines a wide trench in a north-south direction across the eastern side of the site and

descends to an average depth of 42.89 m above sea level or 1.45 m below the threshold of the portal of Santa Costanza. The extent of this trench would seem to indicate an undocumented archaeological investigation. However, small pieces of modern plastic wire insulation and small pieces of modern glass were mixed in the fill dirt and indicate that this incursion was probably the result of the first electrical re-wiring project at Santa Costanza in 1950 as recorded in the archives of the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Roma.<sup>9</sup> Another intervention is indicated by level 56 on the excavation plan, which parallels the eastern limits of the site to a depth of 42.76 m above sea level or 1.58 m below the threshold of the portal of Santa Costanza. This trench corresponds to that indicated in the 1843 excavation plan of Valadier and Canina (Fig. 3). And, a rectangular depression was discovered in the southwest corner of the narthex that has a depth of 43.13 m above sea level or 1.21 m below the threshold of the portal of Santa Costanza. This pit was an *ossario*, or grave of bones, that had been deposited here in an unceremonial heap, and was probably the result of a nonarchaeological intrusion into the area. Several individual layers of beaten earth that were used as pavements in the area were also identified. However, none was significant with regard to the history of the site.

The remains of a postantique and presumably medieval wall identified as level 23 on the excavation plan were discovered running south-north from the foundations of Santa Costanza and resting on the foundation of the exterior wall of the southern side aisle of Sant' Agnese. This wall was composed of roughly cut blocks of tufa and pieces of marble set haphazardly in a concrete bed (Fig. 5). The wall enclosed an area including the western apse of the narthex and may have formed a funerary chapel.

During the excavation, numerous individual tombs were discovered lying parallel to the foundation walls of Santa Costanza and to those of Sant' Agnese and indicate that this area of the narthex and the apse was used as a

<sup>6</sup>R. Krautheimer, *Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romae*, I (Rome, 1937), 35.

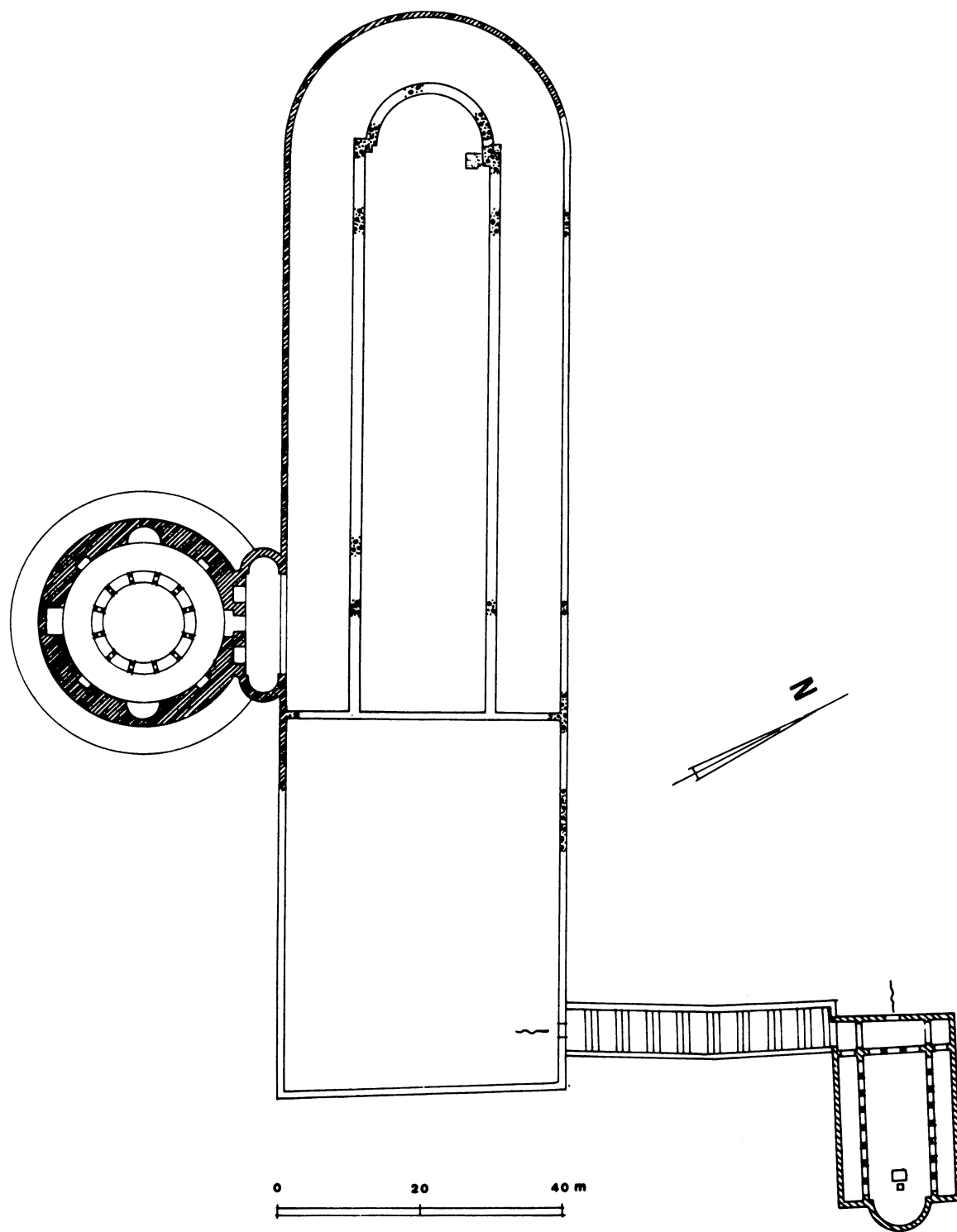
<sup>7</sup>Tolotti, "Le basiliche," 164.

<sup>8</sup>A. Desgodetz, *Sugli Edifici antichi di Roma*, augmented and corrected by G. Valadier and L. Canina (Rome, 1843), 13–15, and Tav. III. 8.

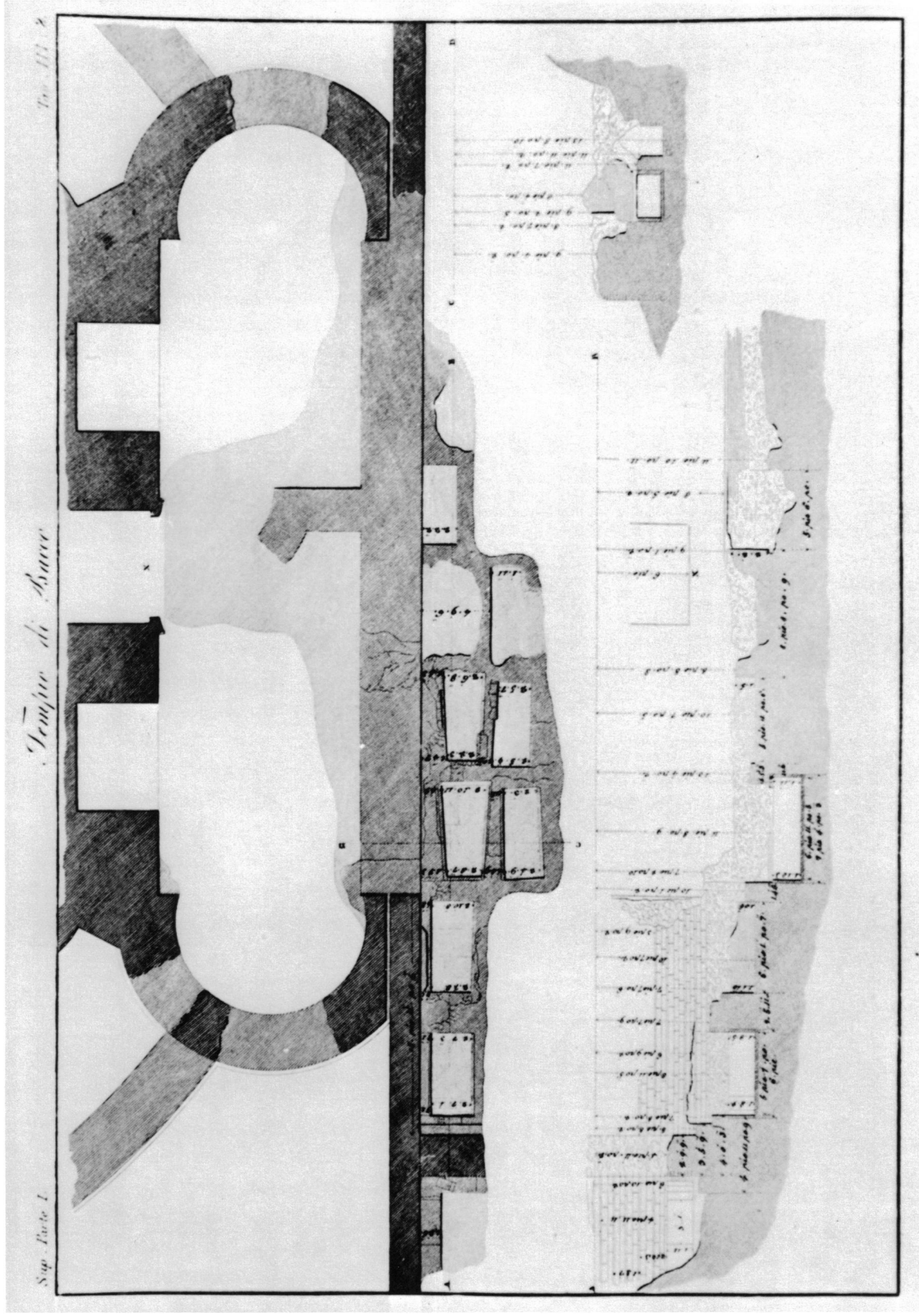
<sup>9</sup>I am indebted to Signorina Lucilla Micozzi, who generously provided me with this information.



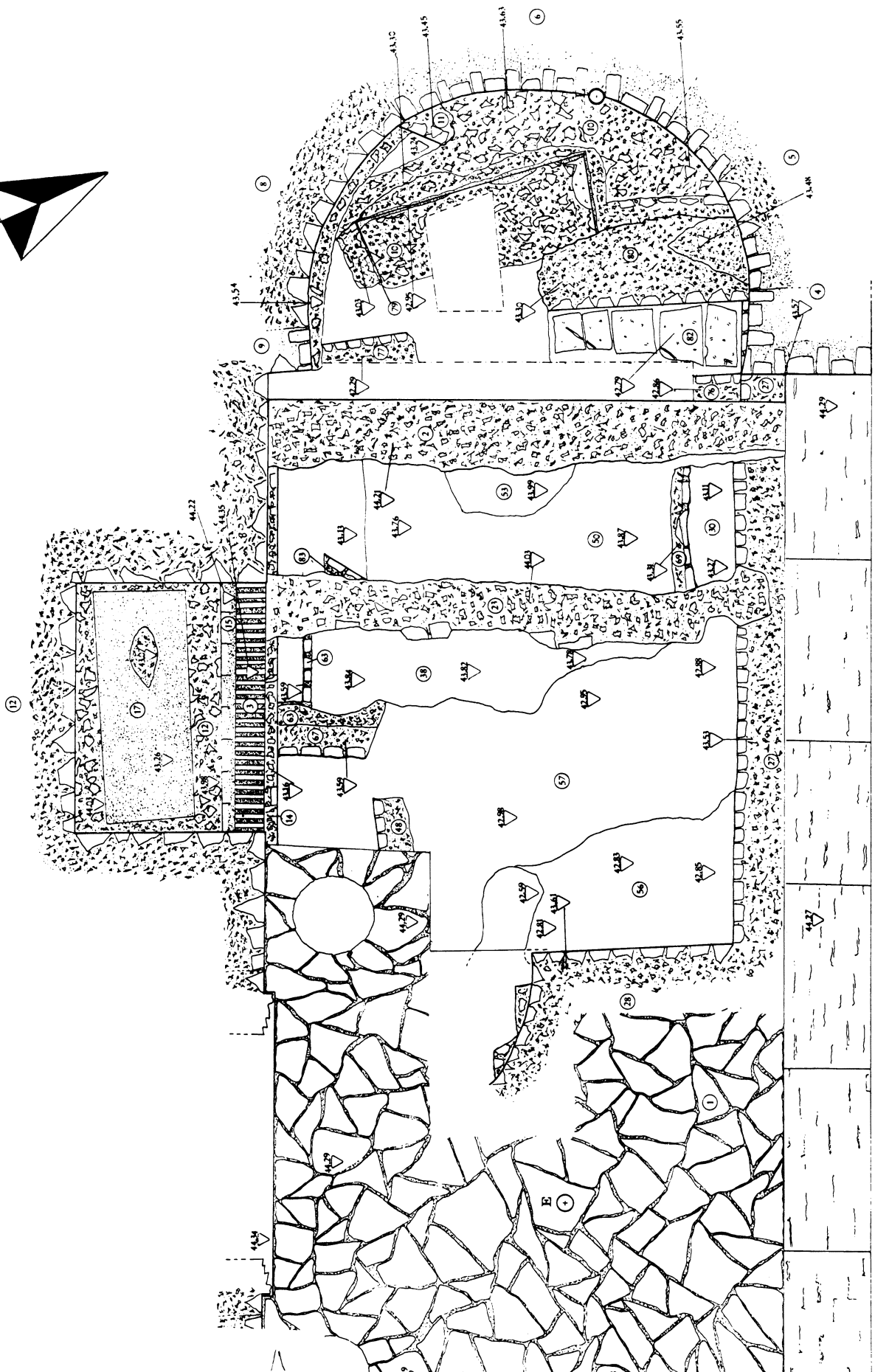
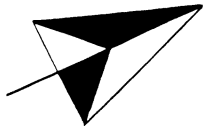
1 Rome, Santa Costanza, facade and narthex












2 Rome, Santa Costanza and Sant' Agnese, plan (after Tolotti)



3 Rome, Santa Costanza, Valadier and Canina excavation plan



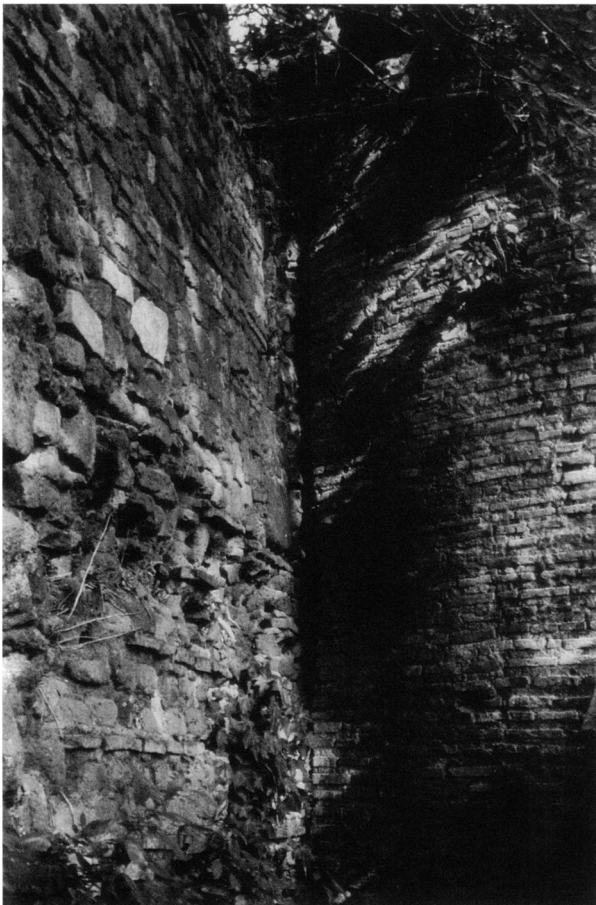
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	opus caementicium		pavimento moderno		terra

4 Rome, Santa Costanza, excavation plan, scale 1:20 (drawn by Milella and Sorrenti)





5 Rome, Santa Costanza, postantique wall



6 Rome, Santa Costanza and Sant' Agnese, exterior wall of western apse of narthex and exterior wall of southern side aisle of Sant' Agnese

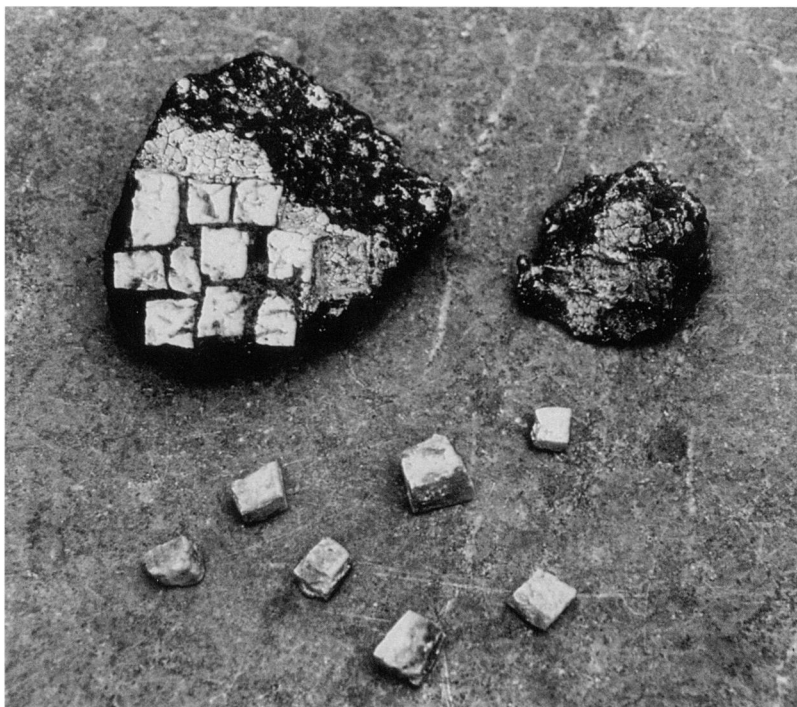




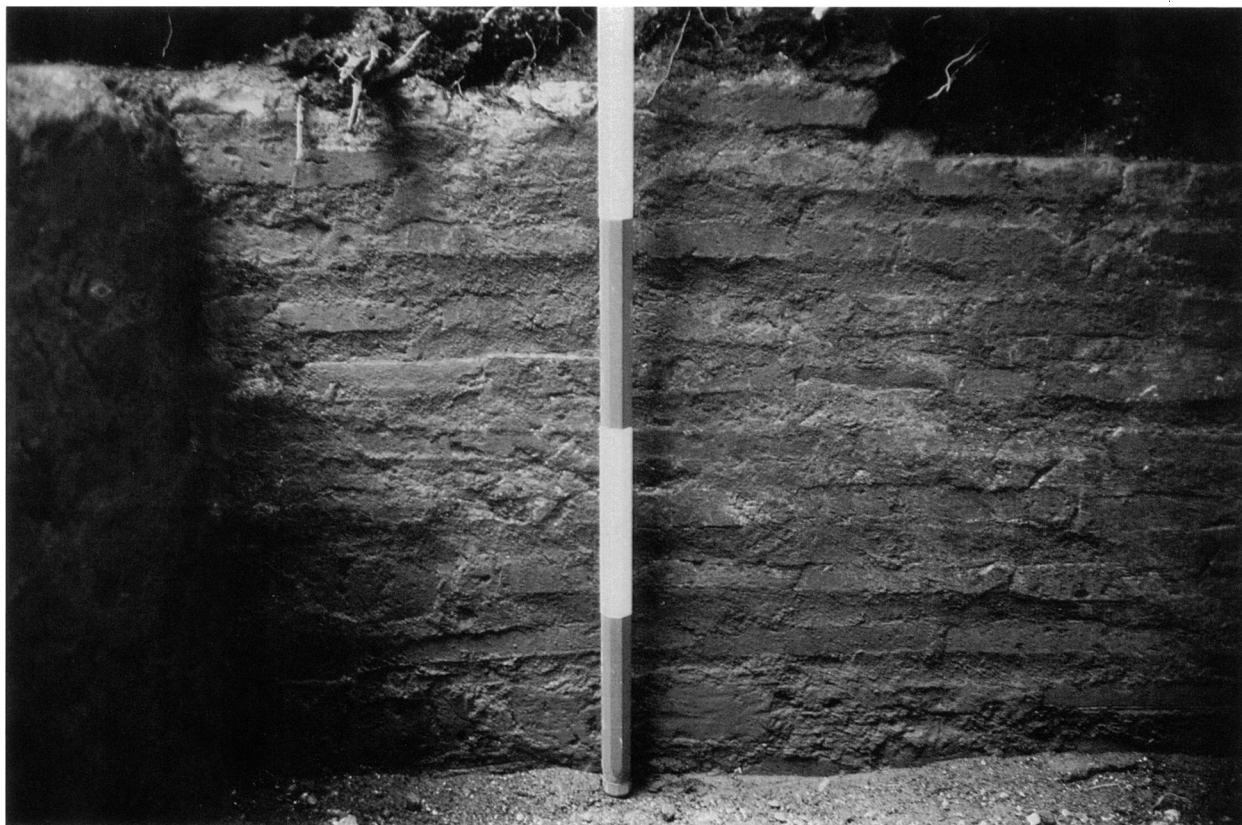
7 Rome, Santa Costanza, western apse of narthex resting on foundation wall of southern side aisle of Sant' Agnese



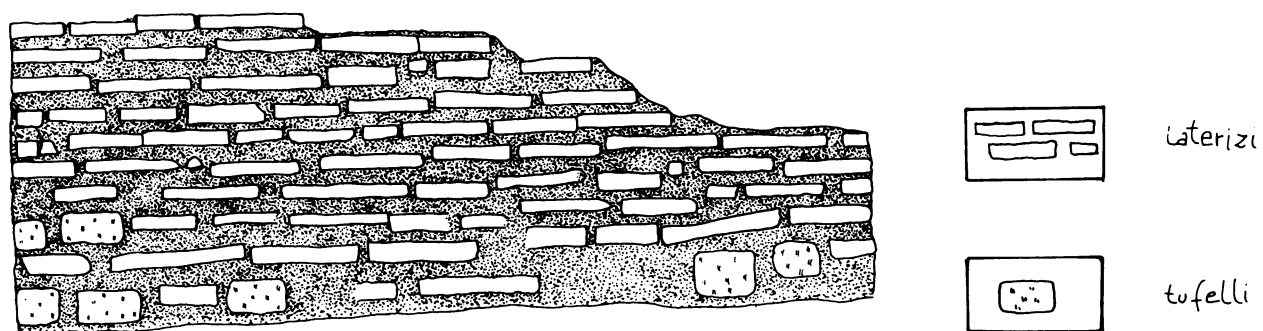
8 Rome, Santa Costanza, above ground foundations of structure at northwest end of corridor



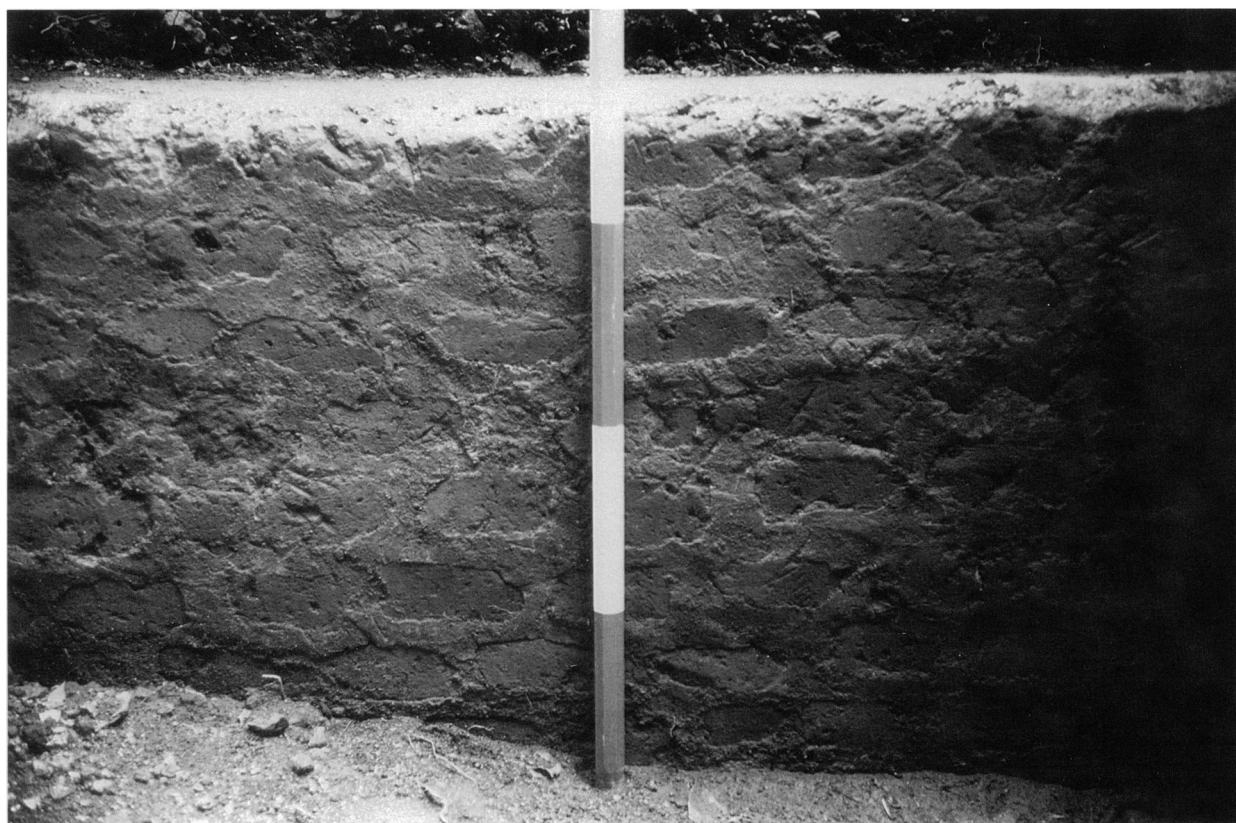
9 Rome, Santa Costanza, remnants of mosaic floor



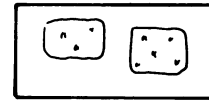
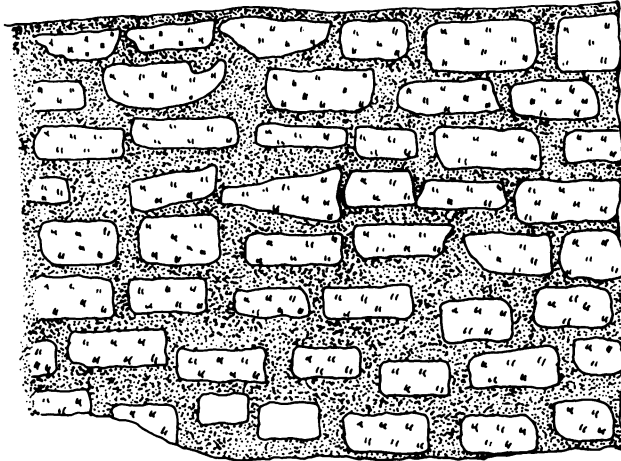
10 Rome, Sant' Agnese, foundation wall, level 28 on plan



11 Rome, Sant' Agnese, drawing of foundation wall, level 28 on plan, scale 1:10 (drawn by Milella and Sorrenti)



12 Rome, Sant' Agnese, foundation wall, level 27 on plan

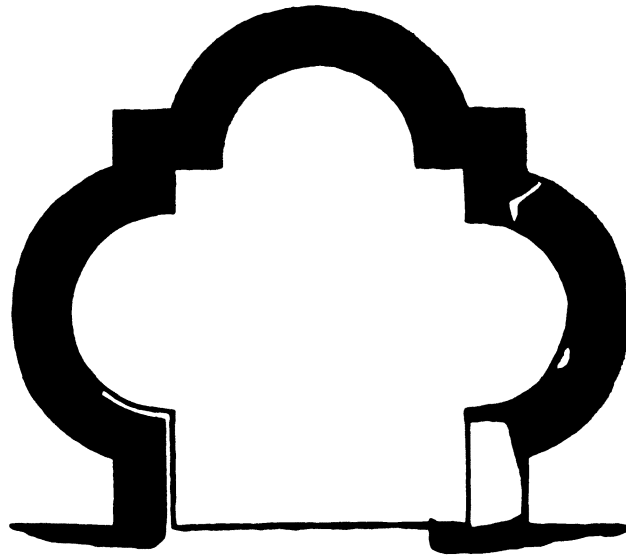


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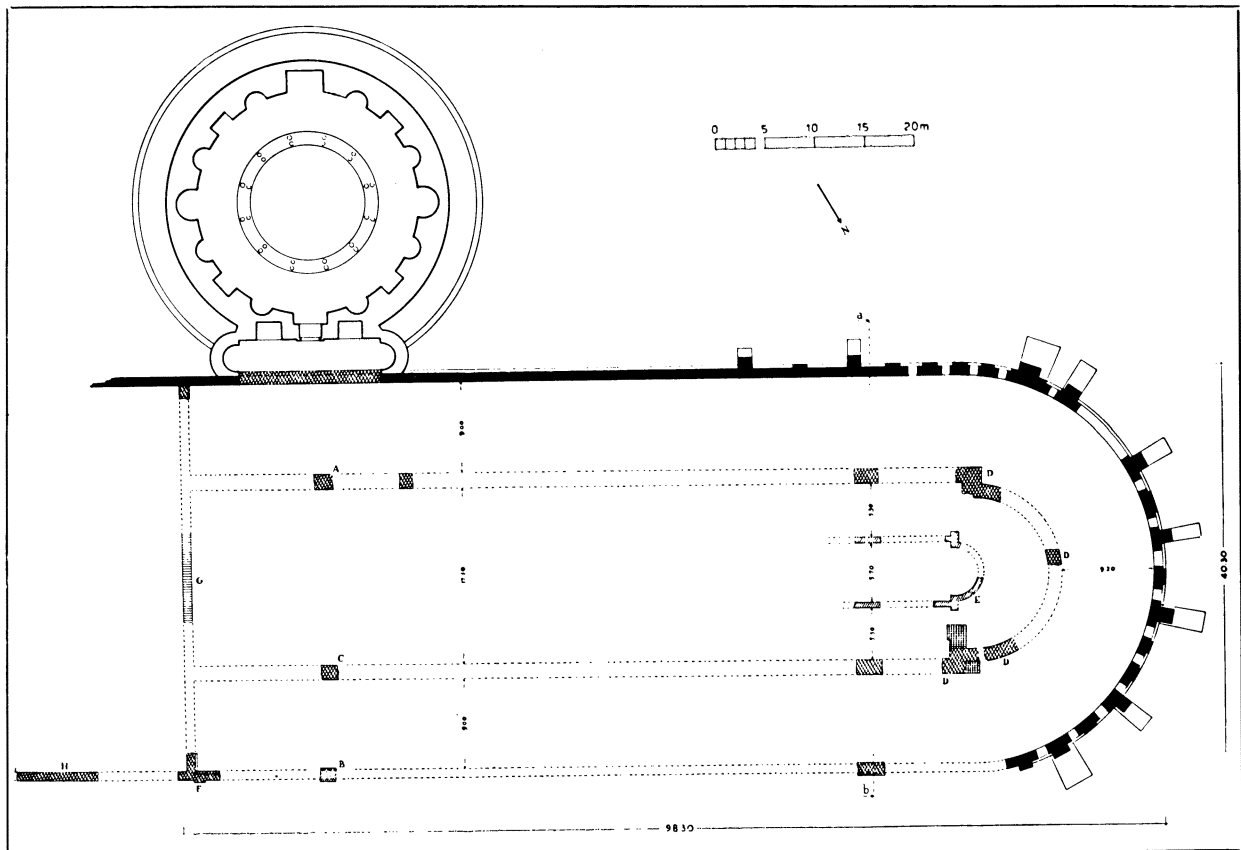
13 Rome, Sant' Agnese, drawing of foundation wall, level 27 on plan, scale 1:10 (drawn by Milella and Sorrenti)



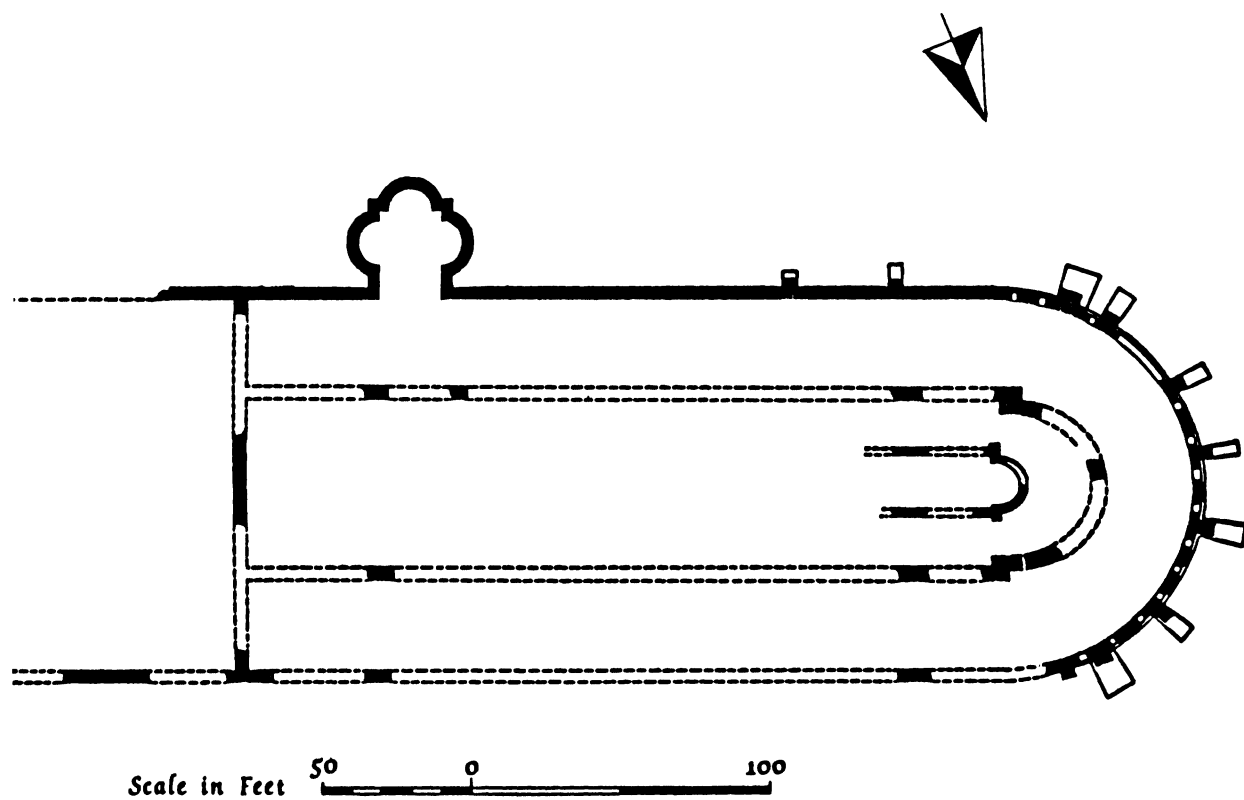
14 Rome, Sant' Agnese, juncture of foundation walls, levels 28 and 27 on plan



15 Rome, Sant' Agnese, triconch reconstruction (drawn by Stanley); white areas indicate walls of triconch revealed during 1987 and 1992 excavations



16 Rome, Sant' Agnese, Perrotti excavation plan



17 Rome, Sant' Agnese, plan (after Perrotti and augmented by Stanley)



burial site after the construction of Santa Costanza. The tombs were defined by enclosing walls of small tufa blocks set in thin beds of concrete and are indicated by levels 48 = 67, 63, 69, 76, 77, 82, and 83 on the excavation plan. Unfortunately, all but one of the tombs had been previously disturbed and the contents, except for a few bones in some cases, had been removed.<sup>10</sup>

There is also evidence that the western niche on the facade of Santa Costanza and the western apse of the narthex served as privileged places of burial.<sup>11</sup> The *opus latericium* masonry of the western niche on the facade of Santa Costanza was vertically cut revealing the interior *opus listatum* in order to prepare the niche as a tomb. A large rectangular tomb was then excavated below the floor of the niche and the walls of the tomb were lined with *opus signinum*. This tomb is indicated by level 17 on the excavation plan. A second privileged burial tomb was discovered in the western apse of the narthex. Again, a large rectangular tomb, indicated by level 79 on the excavation plan, was excavated below the original floor of the apse and its walls were lined with *opus signinum*. This privileged tomb may be related to the postantique wall indicated by level 23 on the excavation plan which enclosed this area of the narthex and may have formed a funerary chapel.

The excavation was also able to clarify the archaeological relationship between the church of Santa Costanza and the cemetery church of Sant' Agnese. The exterior walls of the southern side aisle of Sant' Agnese are composed of *opus vittatum* (B) with a modulus of two brick courses and from three to five in-

termediate courses of tufa blocks.<sup>12</sup> The exterior walls of Santa Costanza are composed of reused Roman bricks in *opus latericium* set in unique mortar with black granules.<sup>13</sup> The exterior wall of the western apse of the narthex of Santa Costanza is not bonded to the exterior wall of the southern side aisle of Sant' Agnese (Fig. 6). And the western apse of the narthex of Santa Costanza rests on top of, and is not bonded to, the foundation of the exterior wall of the southern side aisle of Sant' Agnese (Fig. 7). Thus, the different masonry techniques and the lack of bonding between the walls of Santa Costanza and those of Sant' Agnese indicate that the structures were built during two separate building campaigns.

And finally, the excavation discovered the foundations of the parallel entrance walls and parts of the curving side walls of the structure partially revealed by Valadier and Canina (Fig. 3) and indicated as levels 28, 80, and 11 on the excavation plan. A small portion of these foundation walls had previously been discovered during an excavation undertaken in the summer of 1987 and still exists above ground behind the western apse of the narthex at the northwest end of the corridor between the outer wall of Santa Costanza and the presently partially demolished encircling wall (Fig. 8). The width of these foundation walls was at least 84 cm, as indicated by the observable surface of level 80 on the excavation plan. Small remnants of a white marble mosaic floor (Fig. 9) were discovered in the fill dirt adjacent to the foundations of level 28 on the excavation plan and may or may not be part of the original decoration of the structure. The foundations of this structure, as indicated by level 28, are formed of an initial course of *opus listatum* composed of rectangularly cut, medium-sized blocks of tufa set in a one-and-one-half-inch mortar bed, that is followed by regular courses of *opus latericium* set in one-inch beds of mortar (Figs. 10, 11). The foundation of the exterior wall of the southern side aisle of Sant' Agnese, indicated by level 27 on the excavation plan, consists of regular courses of *opus listatum* set in

<sup>10</sup>The only exception was the grave of a female found lying above tombs 48 = 67 and 63, which was relatively well preserved and contained a brass ring in a postantique style. I would like to thank Professor Archer St. Clair, Head of Finds Processing for the Palatine East Excavation of the American Academy in Rome during the summer of 1992, for supervising the cleaning of the ring and also Dott. Pino Guida at the Istituto Centrale del Restauro in Rome for making the analysis of the copper, zinc, and tin content of the brass ring.

<sup>11</sup>On the concept and practice of privileged burial in the early Middle Ages, see *L'inhumation privilégiée du IV<sup>e</sup> au VIII<sup>e</sup> siècle en Occident*, *Actes du colloque de Créteil, mars 1984*, ed. Y. Duval and J.-Ch. Picard (Paris, 1986), and Y. Duval, *Auprès des saints corps et âme* (Paris, 1988).

<sup>12</sup>See Perrotti, "Ritrovamenti," 82, fig. 5, and Heres, *Paries*, 193–94.

<sup>13</sup>Heres, *Paries*, 307.



one-inch mortar beds (Figs. 12, 13). The foundation wall, level 28, of this new structure is bonded to the foundation wall, level 27, of the southern side aisle of Sant' Agnese (Fig. 14), and confirms that this structure was part of the original construction of the cemetery church of Sant' Agnese between 340 and 350.

Using computer enhancement, I have reconstructed the basic form of this structure as a triconch (Fig. 15) that had an interior width of 10.2 m or almost 34 ft and that originally extended southward beneath the present church of Santa Costanza. This triconch is, according to Fasola and others, a form of building that was prevalent throughout the Mediterranean in the fourth and fifth centuries and which was used especially for the *memoriae* of martyrs.<sup>14</sup> Two important fourth-century examples still survive in Rome at the cemetery of San Callisto,<sup>15</sup> and the foundations of a similar triconch martyrion were discovered in 1857 at San Lorenzo fuori le mura in the Campo Verano appended to the eastern end of the outer wall of the southern side aisle of the Constantinian funerary basilica in a position analogous to the triconch at Sant' Agnese.<sup>16</sup>

At Sant' Agnese, the triconch was surely a martyrion for the veneration of St. Agnes, to whom the cemetery church was dedicated. The triconch martyrion may have only held a contact relic, or *brandea*, in an attempt to create an appropriate place within the church to venerate the saint,<sup>17</sup> as the body of St. Agnes was

buried in the catacombs some distance away.<sup>18</sup> And, since the triconch martyrion was undoubtedly still in use when Constantina died in Bithynia, Asia Minor, in 354, one must conclude that the present church of Santa Costanza is not the original mausoleum of Constantina and that it cannot be a mid-fourth-century structure. In addition, Constantina must have been buried elsewhere in the cemetery complex.

In 1956, Perrotti excavated at Sant' Agnese and discovered the foundations of a unique apsed structure in the middle of the nave of the cemetery basilica<sup>19</sup> (Fig. 16). Perrotti identified this impressive structure, which measured 15 by at least 30 ft, as a tomb that appears to have been part of the foundation of the basilica.<sup>20</sup> And who would have had the prestige and the authority to construct such a tomb in the center of the nave of the imperial basilica? It is possible that this tomb was the original mausoleum of Constantina.<sup>21</sup> Thus,

Mackie, "The Early Medieval Chapel: Decoration, Form and Function. A Study of the Chapels in Italy and Istria in the Period between 313 and 741 A.D.," Ph.D. diss. (University of Victoria, British Columbia, 1991), 59–61.

<sup>18</sup>For the disposition of the body of St. Agnes in the catacombs, see Krautheimer, *Corpus*, I, 30–35.

<sup>19</sup>Perrotti, "Ritrovamenti," 80–81, fig. 2.

<sup>20</sup>Because the foundations of the tomb were constructed of *opus listatum*, unlike the *opus vittatum* (B) foundations of the nave (See Perrotti, "Ritrovamenti," 82, fig. 5), and because the foundation walls of the tomb were not in the exact center of the nave, that is, equidistant from the foundations of the nave, but situated very slightly (10 cm) to the south, Perrotti ("Ritrovamenti," 82) concluded that the tomb was constructed shortly before the cemetery church of Sant' Agnese. However, the *opus listatum* foundations of the tomb are identical to the *opus listatum* foundations of the outer wall of the southern side aisle of Sant' Agnese as revealed during the present excavation (Figs. 12, 13). And the lack of perfect alignment between the tomb foundations and the nave foundations can also be seen in the relationship between the triconch foundations and the side aisle foundations. The foundations of the triconch martyrion at Sant' Agnese are not laid out at an exact 90 degree angle to the foundations of the southern side aisle, but are slightly askew (Fig. 4). Thus, it appears highly probable that the tomb in the center of the nave was laid out as part of the foundation of the cemetery church of Sant' Agnese.

<sup>21</sup>The form of this tomb is indeed similar to the form of many private family tombs which can be found appended to or adjacent to the outer walls of several of the Early Christian cemetery churches in Rome, such as at San Sebastiano (see Krautheimer, *Corpus*, IV, 136–39 and pl. VII, and Tolotti, "Le basiliche," 178, fig. 7). However, at Sant' Agnese the cemetery church was constructed on a large,

<sup>14</sup>On the triconch martyrion in the Early Christian period, see A. Grabar, *Martyrium, Recherches sur le culte des reliques et l'art chrétien antique* (Paris, 1946), I, 103–4; I. Lavin, "The House of Lord: Aspects of the Role of Palace Triclinia in the Architecture of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages," *ArtB* 44 (1962), 1–27, especially 21 note 170; P. Zovatto, "Origine e Significato della Tricorona-martyrium: L'esempio di Concordia," *Palladio* 15 (1965), 7–34; N. Duval and J. Cintas, "Le martyrion de Cincari et les Martyria Triconques et Tétraconques en Afrique," *L'École Française de Rome: Mélanges Antiquité* 88 (1976), 853–927; and U. Fasola, "Indagini nel sopraterra della Catacomba di S. Callisto," *RACr* 56 (1980), 221–78.

<sup>15</sup>See Fasola, "S. Callisto," 267–78.

<sup>16</sup>See G. De Rossi, "Il monumento d'un ignoto S. Leone, Vescovo e martire, nell'agro verano," *BACr* 2 (1864), 54–56, who identified the triconch as a martyrion dedicated to a Bishop Leo from an unidentified diocese outside of Rome. Krautheimer, *Corpus*, II, 120–21, pls. 1 and 2, and fig. 90, has suggested a date for the triconch of shortly after A.D. 384.

<sup>17</sup>On the use of contact relics or *brandea*, see P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* (Chicago, 1981), 86–89, and G.

the mid-fourth-century cemetery church of Sant' Agnese, as reconstructed (Fig. 17), would originally have sheltered the mausoleum of Constantina in the center of the nave of the

basilica and also incorporated a triconch martyrium on its southern flank for the veneration of St. Agnes.<sup>22</sup>

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man-made earthen platform built over the side of a hill that quickly descended to the valley to the west of the basilica. This steeply sloping ground was apparently unsuitable for the construction of family tombs and none have been discovered at Sant' Agnese. The only ground that was level with that of the basilica was located at the eastern end of the southern flank of the nave and was reserved for the triconch martyrium. Thus, the tomb of Constantina was

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given a unique position in the center of the nave of the basilica.

<sup>22</sup>The excavation plan of Valadier and Canina (Fig. 3) indicates the presence of additional unidentified foundations immediately in front of the eastern apse of the narthex of Santa Costanza. Further excavations in the area are being planned for the near future.